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AUTHOR Osofsky, Joy D.; Oldfield, Susan
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ABSTRACT

A primary purpose of the present study was to further investigate the effects of children upon parents in order to gain a better understanding of the interactional relationship between parents and children. Subjects were 42 middle and upper-middle class parents and their daughters. Mothers and fathers were first observed separately with their child in structured and unstructured interaction situations. Each parent was also interviewed separately concerning child-rearing attitudes and behaviors. Interviews were videotaped. As predicted, children's task behaviors (both dependent and independent) resulted in different parental responses. Mothers and fathers interacted more, both verbally and physically, when the children acted dependent. Fathers seemed to reinforce daughters' dependent behaviors more than mothers did, but were less controlling than mothers when the child acted dependent. The differences in parental response may relate to parents' differential involvement or expectations for their children. Whatever the explanation, both mothers and fathers should be studied directly to gain understanding of the similarities and differences in parental behavior and the parent-child relationship. [Filmed from best available copy.] (Author/MK)

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Children's Effects upon Parental Behavior: Mothers and Fathers' Responses to Dependent and Independent Child Behaviors

Joy D. Osofsky and Susan Oldfield

Cornell University

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Most investigators of parent-child interaction have stressed the effects of parental behaviors upon children. However, recent studies have indicated that such a unidirectional approach is limiting; children also influence the behavior and responses emitted by parents (Bell, 1968; 1971; Gewirtz, 1968; Moss, 1967; Yarrow, 1965; Osofsky, 1971). These investigations have provided evidence that infants and children are not simply passive reactive organisms, but rather that they affect the kind, quantity, and quality of parental behavior which is emitted. A primary purpose of the present study was to further investigate the effects of children upon parents in order to gain a better understanding of the interactional relationship between parents and children.

Research investigating the socialization process and parent-child relationships has usually limited the study to a concern with mothers. The fathers' role in the family has rarely been defined as one directly concerned with the raising of children. When the father has been chosen as a subject for study, methods of gathering information have usually included indirect means, such as asking the mother how the father would react. There have been relatively few studies in which the father has been directly contacted for interviewing and questioning, and even fewer in which the father-child relationship has been directly observed. Rosen and D'Andrade (1959), Bee (1967) and Baumrind and Black (1967) have been among the few investigators who have directly studied fathers

with their own children. A second purpose of the present study was to gain a greater understanding of the differential roles of mothers and fathers as parents, through the utilization of direct observations and interviews.

The early and important role of children's dependent and independent behaviors has been amply demonstrated in the literature (Beller, 1955; Sears, et al, 1957; Hartup, 1963; Maccoby and Masters, 1970). Many studies of dependency have elucidated and stressed parental antecedents in the development of dependent and independent child behaviors. In an investigation of the effects of children upon parents, it would seem logical and appropriate to utilize the child's dependent and independent behaviors; therefore, such behaviors were included as a focus of the study.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were 42 middle and upper-middle class parents and their daughters ranging in age from 4.5 years to 6.2 years ($\bar{X}$ = 5.1 years). About one-half of the children were first born and one-half last born; one-half of the sample had been to nursery school and one-half had not. The names of the families were obtained from school lists of children who would be entering kindergarten the following year in the Ithaca, New York, school system.

Procedure

The subjects were contacted first by letter and then by telephone and asked to come to Cornell University to participate in a study of

parent-child relationships. The parents were offered a small sum of money to pay for expenses which might arise due to their participation in the project. Mothers and fathers were first observed separately with their child in structured and unstructured interaction situations. They were then interviewed separately concerning their child-rearing attitudes and behaviors utilizing a modified Sears, et al (1957) interview schedule. The subjects were informed that they would be observed from behind a one-way mirror and that the entire session would be video taped.

During the structured interaction situation, one of the tasks was designed to make the child act independent (assembling an easy puzzle) and the other to make the child act dependent (assembling a difficult puzzle). To further encourage the desired behaviors, the child was instructed to do the easy puzzle by herself and to obtain help from her parent with the difficult puzzle. The parent was asked to be with the child during the performance of these tasks. During the unstructured situation, the parent was requested to wait with the child while the other parent was being interviewed. The parent was told that any of the games and materials in the room could be used.

Utilizing the video tapes, children's behavior was rated for the amount of independent and dependent behavior displayed. Independent child behaviors included child working on her own, not asking for help, exhibiting independent behavior in general, and making a statement of confidence. Dependent child behaviors included asking for help, following directions, watching parent do the puzzle, and asking about the

absent parent. Parents' behavior was evaluated for control, verbalization, physical interaction, positive reinforcement, and general encouragement of dependence and independence. Observational data was coded in 15 second intervals by two unbiased observers until reliability was established. Interrater reliabilities on a sample of the data ranged from .70 to .96 (X = .80) for the parents' behaviors, and .66 to .91 (X = .80) for the children's behavior. Following the establishment of reliability, one of the raters scored the remainder of the tapes. The interviews, conducted by two interviewers, stressed data concerning dependence and independence in children. After establishing reliability, which ranged from .65 to .97 (X = .81), the remainder of the interviews were coded by one of the raters.

Results

Analyses revealed that the structured laboratory tasks were effective in producing the desired dependent and independent child behaviors. Independent child behaviors occurred twice as frequently in the easy task as in the difficult task; dependent child behaviors occurred more than three times as frequently in the difficult task as in the easy task. The differences were highly significant. The amounts of dependent and independent child behaviors displayed did not relate to the sex of the participating parent.

As predicted, children's behaviors resulted in different parental responses. Parents (both mothers and fathers) interacted more, both verbally ($p < .001$) and physically ($p < .001$) when the children acted dependent. Parents were also more controlling when the children were

dependent ($p < .001$). Two differences, based upon sex of parent were noted. Fathers, but not mothers, positively reinforced the children more when they acted dependent than when they acted independent ($p < .02$). While both parents were more controlling when the children acted dependent ($p < .001$), the mothers were even more controlling in their responses than were the fathers ($p < .05$).

In addition to the differential parental responses between mothers and fathers which seem to have resulted from the children's behaviors, preliminary analyses of the observational data and interviews revealed differences in patterns of behavior related to other variables. There was a negative relationship between birth order of the child, with birth order rated from first born to last born, and fathers' controlling behaviors ($r = -.54$, $p < .01$) and amount of verbalization ($r = -.47$, $p < .01$). For mothers, there was a positive relationship between amount of verbalization and birth order ($r = .42$, $p < .05$). For fathers, but not mothers, there was a positive relationship between the child's having nursery school experience and his reported strictness with the child ($r = .42$, $p < .05$), and a negative relationship between the amount of control he used when the child acted independent during the behavioral observations and his reported encouragement of independence during the interview ($r = -.53$, $p < .01$). More thorough analysis and and reporting of the relationships between observational and interview data must await a longer paper.

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Discussion

The results of the present investigation would appear to demonstrate

that just as parents affect children's responses, children's behaviors affect parental responses in the parent-child relationship. Utilizing structured observational situations, it was shown that children's behaviors could be adequately controlled to study the effects of dependent and independent child behaviors upon parental responses. In addition, the feasibility of studying both mothers and fathers' responses to differential child behaviors was demonstrated; the use of both parents would appear to be of potential importance for many types of investigations.

Children, in the controlled situations studied, did not act more dependent or independent with either parent. As predicted, the parents responded differently to the differentially evoked child behaviors. Both parents displayed more controlling behaviors and interacted more, physically and verbally, when the children acted dependent. This result is consistent with the position which stresses the importance of the children's as well as the parents' role in the parent-child relationship. Children who are more dependent, may encourage, or pull, controlling behaviors from the parents. If children continually ask parents for help and do not perform on their own, the parental response may be to accede to these demands. In determining the origins of child behaviors, it would appear important to study both the parents and the children's responses.

The present study would also appear to demonstrate the importance of including the father, as well as the mother, in studies of parent-child relations. As noted, there were some important similarities in

mothers and fathers' responses to their daughters; however, there were also differences related to the sex of the parent. Fathers tended to reinforce their daughters dependent behaviors more than did mothers, but were less controlling than were mothers when the child acted dependent. Birth order, nursery school experience, and reported encouragement of independence all differentially related to observed and reported parental responses, on the basis of parental sex. It would appear that mothers and fathers demonstrate different patterns of behaviors in response to their children and their children's behaviors. These differences may relate to parents' differential involvement or expectations for their children. Daughters may pull different behaviors from fathers than they do from mothers. Whatever the explanation, without studying both mothers and fathers directly, it is not possible to gain an understanding of the similarities and differences in parental behavior and the parent-child relationship. Conclusive explanations of the effects of children upon parents must await still further studies in a variety of areas.

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